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ABSTRACT

Building on one aspect of a large-scale longitudinal investigation, a study examined first graders' engagement with literature. Subjects, five Euro-American students (two males, three females), were videotaped during two 30-minute storybook reading sessions one week apart. During the reading session, child and adult sat side-by-side in an effort to recreate a parent-child storybook reading session. Before reading, and throughout each of the four stories, the adult encouraged communication about the text and/or the reading experience. Children's verbal and nonverbal actions were analyzed using a modified constant comparative method. Results indicated the individuality of each child's engagement pattern, although commonalities across all respondents surfaced in three areas: (1) the children frequently commented on or pointed to story-related pictures; (2) all children predicted story events when prompted through open-ended questions; and (3) children responded easily to end-of-story requests for evaluative comments. Findings suggest that at least one type of engagement for first-grade children involves a three-way interaction among a text, a child, and a social representative, and that this engagement varies according to the individual. (A figure representing a model of first grade engagement, and a figure representing a possible model of general engagement for one subject are included.) (RS)

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What is Engagement With Literature to a First Grade Child?

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What is Engagement With Literature to a First Grade Child?

Background

In a position paper outlining the goals of the National Reading Research Center (NRRC) Alvermann and Guthrie (1993) state that a reader's engagement with texts is a strong predictor of his or her success in reading. One of the earliest uses of the term *engagement* derives from process-product studies and refers to the amount of time a student is involved in a learning task (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1984). Discussing the findings of such studies over the past 25 years, Carroll (1989) states, "I have always cautioned that time as such is not what counts, but what happens during that time" (p. 27). In an effort to examine adolescents' responses during reading, Squire (1964) found "considerable individual variation" because readers "respond to literature in unique and selective ways and that the nature of an individual's reactions is conditioned by the dynamic interplay of a constellation of factors rather than by single causes" (pp. 50-51). Investigating the responses of younger children within various storybook reading formats, Morrow (1988) also used an interactive methodology. Echoing Squire (1964), she suggested that the dynamic nature of children's responses to literature involves influences upon the child as well as influences emanating from the child.

Methods

This study builds on one aspect of a large-scale longitudinal investigation of changes in teaching and learning in first grade reading programs associated with adoption of new basal reading materials. During the original study we rated stories from both old and new basal programs for engagement potential (Authors, 1993) and then read specific pairings of the stories to children in kindergarten, first, and second grades. After each story, we asked the children how well they liked the story and what they noticed. We also asked them to

choose a favorite story from each pairing and to elaborate on their choices. While this approach validated the story-rating scale, it also raised further questions. Some children who appeared very involved with a story during reading rated it as "not very good" after it was read. Others apparently responded nonverbally to a picture or idea during reading, but, when asked after the story to elaborate, shrugged and said, "I just liked it." Because it seemed the children had much to say about the stories, but didn't remember their ideas long enough to share them after the reading (Simon, 1974), we wondered if a more responsive and immediate assessment context (e.g., Squire, 1964; Morrow, 1988) would provide a broader view of young children's engagement.

To create such a context we invited first grade students from the original study to participate in further inquiry. Five Euro-American first grade students (two males, three females) met with us individually for two thirty-minute videotaped storybook-reading sessions one week apart. During the reading we sat side-by-side with each child in an effort to recreate a parent-child storybook-reading setting. The children appeared to adapt quickly to the situation and results of debriefing one week after Session Two included positive comments such as: "The camera didn't bother me" and "It was fun to be on the camera and hear stories."

During each session, one of us read aloud to a child while the other monitored equipment and maintained field notes. At the beginning of both sessions, each child chose the order in which the four stories would be read, giving reasons for the choices. Before reading, and throughout each story, we encouraged communication about the text and/or the reading experience. We attempted to share each story in as natural a way as possible and to extend children's comments through non-directive probes such as "Can you tell me more?" and "What made you say that?" After completing the first session with each

child, we recognized that our questions centered upon children's verbal comments. Thus, in Session Two we asked more questions about children's nonverbal actions such as "What made you laugh there?" and "What are you thinking now?"

Data Analysis

Using a modified constant comparative method (Spradley, 1980; J. Harris, personal communication, March 1993) we transcribed audiotapes and then viewed each videotape to add descriptions of children's nonverbal actions. Transcriptions were coded according to the following categories: Questions, Comments, Nonverbal Actions, Reads Aloud, Takes Control, Choosing Behaviors, and Conversation Beyond Text. If the relationship between a comment or action and the child's intent was unclear, it was coded in a category labeled *Undefined*.

Trustworthiness and Confirmability

Although we sought to member check children's comments and actions throughout each session, such methods may be less reliable with young respondents. Further, 60 minutes with each child may have been too short to reach saturation. Thus, after data was transcribed and analyzed, we met with the children's teachers to ascertain their perceptions of the students' typical in-class response/engagement patterns. Without disclosing our study purpose or findings, we asked teachers to respond to the open-ended question: "Tell us about ____ ." Teacher interviews confirmed our perceptions of each child. That the teachers frequently described their students in the exact terms we had used between ourselves provided further evidence of the groundedness of our analysis.

An Emerging Model of Engagement

During data coding, transcript themes consistently reflected, in various combinations, characteristics of the children, of ourselves, and of the texts.

Over time, a model of the interaction of these three components emerged which came to symbolize one possible view of engagement (See Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

In this model, the topmost sphere represents the **child**, who brings his or her personal experience, knowledge, and unique personality traits to the reading experience. The next sphere represents all aspects of the specific **text** read during the interaction. The third sphere depicts the **social representative**, the person interacting with the child (i.e., researcher, parent, teacher, friend). Together, the spheres form three 2-way interactions and one central 3-way interaction. We chose to label as **engagement** only the central interaction involving simultaneous contributions from all three components since our only "sure" indicator involved the child's communication of engagement to us (verbally or nonverbally). Additionally, all model components are influenced by the cultural context in which they occur. Although the influence of **culture** is depicted with a solid line, we do not mean to claim that it is bounded and/or static. Further, we view the spheres as permeable and ever-changing in size and degree of intersection one with another.

Influence of the Model

After we developed the engagement model (Figure 1), we viewed a videotape of a reading session with Cole. Cole's general lack of eye contact with Meredith had originally led us to believe that he was somehow less engaged than some of the other children. However, reviewing the video revealed that Cole laughed and commented freely during some of the stories, apparently "engaged" with the text. Even though Cole did not often look at Meredith, he did *interact* verbally with her. In evaluating Cole's interactions with Meredith according to the model, we recognized that frequency of eye contact was not necessarily a

required indicator of engagement. Viewing the spheres in Cole's model of engagement as differing in relative contribution to engagement (as determined by relative frequency and intensity of response) suggested that Cole's interaction might look very different from Figure 1 and yet still indicate engagement (See Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 about here

Our experience with Cole helped us extend our view of engagement beyond the "ideal balance" of three equal components. Further, altering the size and degree of intersection among the various components of the model according to response frequency and intensity provided a tool for depicting differences observed among the children. Summaries for each child are included below. However, due to space limitations, the general engagement model for each child is not included.

Individual Summaries

Ann

During Session One Ann wiggled about and often responded to Meredith's comments nonverbally with a smile and nod or by pointing to the book. During both sessions, her verbal comments and questions tended to be picture-based. After Meredith read "Boo Bear Takes a Rest," Ann spontaneously took control of the text (a familiar one from her classroom), found a page she'd read previously and read it aloud. She then asked Meredith several questions. Many of Ann's spontaneous comments in Session One related to the pictures and main character of this familiar story. Ann evidenced a marked rise in the number of evaluative comments about the stories from Session One to Session Two (from 4 to 19). However, the most striking change in behavior involved her large body movements.

While she shifted in her chair 87 times during Session One, she moved in like manner only twice during Session Two. Additionally, the number of her general verbal comments increased greatly during Session Two (from 24 to 70). The emerging picture of Ann was of a socially interactive child who enjoyed talking with adults and whose attention generally focused on pictures or familiar text. Most often she appeared to express "engagement" through spontaneous picture-related questions and pointing gestures.

Cole

During Session One Cole made few spontaneous comments and his body movements were small in nature (shifting a hand slightly, rubbing his nose lightly). He spoke in a very soft voice and made direct eye contact with Meredith only 3 times. A notable exception to Cole's short answers occurred when he chose the order for reading the stories. Cole chose "Boo Bear Takes a Rest" last, indicating that he had previously read the story. In spite of choosing "Boo Bear" last, Cole spontaneously read aloud with Meredith throughout the story. Surprisingly, while Cole noted that knowing the story was the reason he chose "Boo Bear" last, his first choice for Session Two was "Good As New," a familiar story from his current class text. He made several spontaneous comments during "Good As New" and spontaneously read aloud the last part of the story, asking for help in pronouncing a word.

During Session Two Cole's evaluative comments about the stories and pictures increased threefold. Throughout the last two stories he laughed and commented spontaneously, often making eye contact with Meredith. At the end of the last story Cole volunteered his opinion of the story and discussed the progression of the pictures:

C: Mmmmm-mmmm. I kinda liked, I liked the ending. And I noticed, I noticed here that (turning pages in book) here the flowers are small

(points to page) and here they're all open (turns pages with both hands and points).

M: Oh my goodness! What did that make you think?

C: (Shrugs shoulders.) I don't know. It showed me that a lot of time was going by.

(Note: For ease of transcript interpretation, comments are identified by the first initial of the speaker's pseudonym, underlining is used to highlight a specific event or point, words read aloud from the basal stories appear in boldface type and descriptions of nonverbal actions and setting notations are included in parentheses.)

Cole's emerging picture was that of a reserved, evaluative thinker able to "forget himself" in the company of humorous or familiar stories and colorful pictures carrying a story of their own. He appeared to express engagement through laughter, smiles, and reading aloud.

Laura

Laura's comments were generally longer and exhibited more depth than those of the other respondents. While many of her behaviors remained relatively constant across sessions, there were some changes. For example, she evaluated stories or pictures 11 times during Session One and 30 times during Session Two. She also predicted upcoming events during most stories, often accompanying her speech with supporting gestures. At the end of Session One, Laura explained why she liked "Leo the Late Bloomer." Her explanation is particularly compelling given the common publishing practice of supporting text with pictures:

M: You liked that best. Why would you pick that now?

L: Because it's a good story (Begins rocking back and forth in chair) ...
My mom she reads me a book only once and I have to read and I don't
really know how to read so good. So I look at the pictures. And

that's a good one (referring to Leo) because you don't really have to read that, you can already, you can already see by the pictures ...

In addition to liking stories where the pictures support the text, Laura consistently mentioned that she generally disliked books with "real" pictures, especially if they dealt with topics she'd seen or read before. However, with respect to reading familiar words, Laura was more positive:

M: How do you feel about us reading from the same book you're reading from?

L: It's, I can read, I can repeat all the things that you say and, see the words in here are gonna be easier because they already told us.

Laura was less supportive of repeated phrases. This is interesting in light of publishers' increased emphasis on repetitive language within first grade reading materials:

M: What are you thinking? (L smiles, sits up in chair, hugs left leg to her chest with both arms.)

L: That in all the pictures, well, almost all of, they said it right at the end um, says "My bear was still dirty, it was still dirty," and then on the other, um, on the other (M smiles) pages.

M: Oh! (M turns page back.) So you heard me repeat a line?

L: Yeah.

M: My bear is, was still dirty? Okay. Do you like it when you hear a line

L: Mmmm.

M: over again?

L: In a song, in a song, yeah (looks up and around as if thinking). But not that much in the stories.

The emerging picture of Laura was one of a social, inquisitive child, responsive to both visual and verbal nuances of text, who most often expressed "engagement" through her comments.

Jaquita

Jaquita was the least verbal respondent. In spite of Kathy's efforts to engage Jaquita in conversation throughout both sessions, no changes were observed in Jaquita's spontaneous comments (less than 5 in both sessions combined) or social interactions (e.g., looking at Kathy) from Session One to Session Two. However, Jaquita did evidence a marked increase in verbal comments and nonverbal pointing focused on pictures—perhaps due to Kathy's persistent efforts to obtain responses:

K: ... What are you thinking?

J: Nothing.

K: Nothing. You're looking at those pictures. Are you looking for something?

J: Yes (smiles).

K: What were you looking for?

J: I was looking for what's wrong with him. (Left hand moves up to chin.)

Most often, Jaquita answered Kathy's questions with a single word, a short phrase, or a slight nod, but in at least 5 cases she responded with silence. At the end of each story Kathy's "What did you think of the story?" received "I liked it" all 8 times, a phenomenon uniquely Jaquita's; however, follow-up questions did prompt evaluative answers that included brief comments about text detail, main ideas, and pictures. The overall picture of Jaquita emerging from the sessions was of a quiet, non-spontaneous child who could, when pressed, provide slightly more elaborated responses.

Nathan

Nathan was the most verbal respondent, a prime example of Stanovich's (1986) evocative child. At the beginning of Session One he climbed immediately onto a chair and stood, looking down at Kathy with a serious expression, to explain why he chose "Leo the Late Bloomer" as the first story. Nathan consistently "took control" of the reading sessions. For example, before Kathy even began to read the first story, he interrupted:

N: (Sits down.) **Leo the Late Bloomer. Leo couldn't do anything right.**

K: All right. You read that first page and now I'm going to read it, okay? **Leo the Late Bloomer.**

In 4 of 8 stories, Nathan directed Kathy as to who would read what:

N: ... I'll, I'll, you can be this guy (points to left side of page) and I'll be the others (points to right side of page).

K: I'm going to be the parrot?

N: Or should, or should I be the parrot? (Points to parrot.)

K: Well, what do you think?

N: I want to be the ones who say no (points to right side of page).

Although all respondents asked questions, Nathan's queries were often unique. For example, he often combined both a rhetorical question and a comprehension check, and then asked Kathy's opinion. Not surprisingly, considering that moral training is part of his private school curriculum, Nathan also seemed to appreciate the "lessons" in the stories:

N: Well, it wasn't that funny and it wasn't that realistic, but it gave you a moral. (Leans back in chair and looks at wall.)

K: A moral. What moral did it give you?

N: That you need rest after you've worked hard, it's hard work to let, to help someone rest. (Leans forward.)

The emerging picture of Nathan was that of a social first grader who responds well to adults. His correct use of words like *morals* and *realistic*, along with his ability to draw extensively from background knowledge indicate advanced academic ability. Further, Nathan's numerous attempts to engage Kathy through eye contact, questions, and didactic speeches are indicative of his social skills and confidence in interacting with adults.

Comparisons Across Cases

In looking across the data we were struck with the individuality of each child's engagement pattern, although commonalities across all respondents surfaced in three areas: 1) comments and actions related to pictures; 2) predictions; and 3) evaluative comments. The 450+ entries in the *Verbal* and *Nonverbal Picture* categories support Morrow's (1988) finding that young children frequently comment on or point to story-related pictures. Over both sessions, the number of picture comments ranged from Ann's 18 to Nathan's 44. However, in support of the individuality noted by Squire (1964) and Morrow (1988), we found that the type of picture which elicited the comments varied by child (e.g., realistic photo versus cartoon drawing).

Predicting was a second unifying category. All children predicted story events when prompted through open-ended questions such as "What are you thinking?" or "Why did you smile?" The number of prompted predictions grew from 7 in the first session to 21 in the second. Because questions that would "train" children to predict were carefully avoided, the 21 predictions during Session Two indicate that students engaged in predicting behavior which, unless elicited, generally remained unexpressed.

The third unifying category was *Evaluative Comments*. We were not surprised that children responded easily to end-of-story questions such as: "What did you think of the story?" since this format is common in many school and home read-

aloud events. However, as we attempted to elicit during-reading responses, the number of evaluative comments tripled from Session One to Session Two. This was interesting because our questions were open-ended, e.g., "What are you thinking now?" and did not specifically direct students to offer evaluative comments.

Discussion and Implications

Consistent with the naturalistic paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we have developed several working hypotheses regarding first graders' engagement with literature. We offer the following considerations as a summary of our current thinking, as a source of future research questions, and as a survey of possible educational implications.

Because the children offered predictions and evaluative comments that may have remained unexpressed in other settings, we agree with Squire (1964) that an interactive format provides an important window on readers' engagement with literature. We found that interacting with individual children over a relatively short period of time provided a remarkably consistent view of response/engagement patterns that did not differ from those developed over an entire school year by classroom teachers. Further, we believe that children's engagement patterns can be depicted visually and that an essential element of modeling these patterns involves altering the dimensions of model components to reflect individual variation. Such modeling may prove helpful for researchers and teachers interested in describing and enhancing young children's reading engagement.

We believe that at least one type or form of engagement for first grade children involves a three-way interaction among a text, a child, and a social representative. This engagement varies according to the individual. For example, while Authors (1993) identified familiarity as a factor in engagement, for respondents in this study, the nature of that familiarity was crucial.

While some children appeared more easily engaged with familiar ideas or concepts, others required a sense of novelty.

Given the relatively clear individual patterns emerging in this study, close examination of interactions during one-to-one reading sessions may provide insight into the types of literature and experiences that engage other children. We found videotaping an invaluable tool for recording children's verbal and nonverbal responses throughout the story-reading experience. In many instances, returning to a specific event facilitated data triangulation, and helped avoid misperceptions. However, care must be taken in interpreting video clips, because, even after extended study, some behaviors cannot be categorized (e.g., swinging legs, shifting in a chair due to discomfort).

At the beginning of each reading session, we asked the children to choose the order in which the stories would be read, hoping to gain insight into children's first impressions of the stories and to create an environment in which students felt valued. In reflecting upon the teachers' confirmation of our perceptions of each student, we strongly believe that our efforts to allow choice and to encourage communication were successful and valuable for future research.

If, as Teale (1990) argues, storybook reading is "the instructional activity most important to an early childhood classroom" (p. 54), research efforts focused on the dynamic of young children's engagement with texts are well-directed and important. We recommend that future researchers consider interactive methodologies involving student choice, videotaping, and cooperative research teaming as excellent tools for inquiry.

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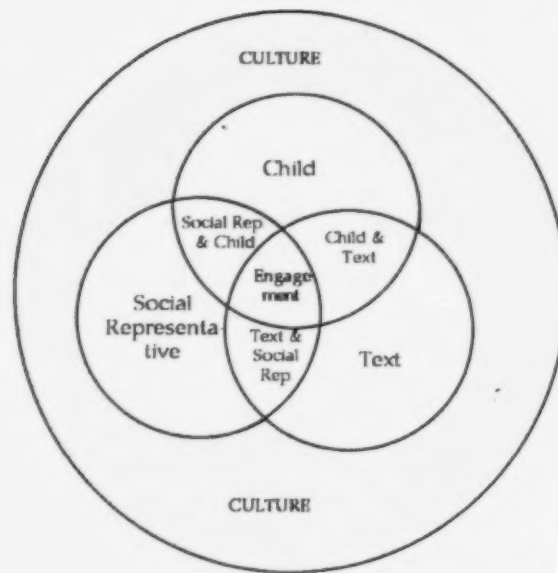


Figure 1: Model of first grade engagement as an interaction between child, social representative (researcher, teacher, parent, or other), and text occurring within a given cultural context.

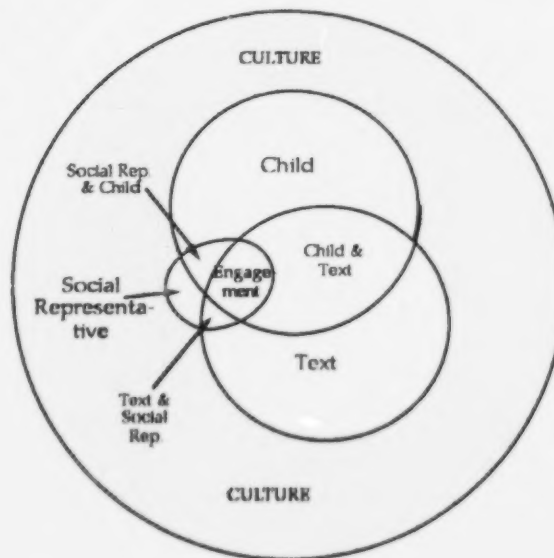


Figure 2: A possible model of general engagement patterns for Cole.